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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to investigate acceptance and openness as possible universal, consequent interpersonal rewards among foreign-born employees who work in United States companies. In this replication of an earlier study using United States-born employees, 42 United States-born and 52 foreign-born employees completed a booklet containing 20 dialogues created by the researcher. Variables were United States-born versus foreign-born employees, task-relevant versus nontask-relevant subordinate messages, and accepting versus reciprocally open versus neutral-negative supervisor responses. Data were analyzed with an analysis of variance and a post-hoc Scheffe test. Hypotheses being tested included the expectations that foreign-born employees would perceive managerial/supervisory "acceptance" of their own communication openness as a consequent interpersonal reward for both nontask-relevant and task-relevant messages, and that foreign-born employees would perceive managerial/supervisory "reciprocal openness" as a consequent interpersonal reward for their own communication openness in nontask-relevant and task-relevant messages. Results support all four hypotheses at the .05 level of statistical significance. A need exists to study empathy more from an academic and training perspective to find which types of responses appear sincerely more empathetic to the receiver. (DF)

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Acceptance, Openness and Empathy as Universal Organizational Communication Skills: A Quasi-experimental Field Study

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A B S T R A C T

ACCEPTANCE, OPENNESS AND EMPATHY AS
UNIVERSAL ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS:
A QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL FIELD STUDY

This replication of an earlier study with United States-born employees tests the attitudes of foreign-born employees toward supervisors' acceptance of and reciprocal openness to task-relevant and non-task relevant "open" messages from the employee. Forty-two United States-born and fifty-two foreign-born employees completed a 20-dialogue questionnaire in this 2 x 2 x 3 field study. Data were analyzed using a multiple-factor ANOVA and a post hoc Sheffé test. All hypotheses were supported at the .05 level or better. Reliability coefficients calculated for each of the response-type categories prompted an in-depth discussion on how supervisors and managers might improve their abilities to demonstrate accurate empathy.

ACCEPTANCE, OPENNESS AND EMPATHY AS UNIVERSAL ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS. A QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL FIELD STUDY

Many of today's managers in cosmopolitan environments are finding new challenges to their managerial competence. Styles and skills that have been developed primarily for use with United States-born employees have proven less successful when applied to situations involving foreign-born employees working in the U.S. In their search for excellence in organizational development, managers wish to tap the potential of all employees, U.S. as well as foreign-born; however, a lack of understanding of how to approach such concepts as problem-solving, decision making, leadership, motivation, change, achievement and countless others, coupled with the fact that company workforces in many sections of the United States are largely multicultural have created a need for programs in developing cultural awareness and skills. It is infeasible to expect managers to learn how to approach each of several cultures represented in any one organization; being able to slip into and out of other cultures is a skill belonging to a limited number of bicultural individuals. A more practical suggestion is for managers to develop universal skills that will work best in a number of cross-cultural encounters, making the

most of the situation while offending as few people as possible. One obvious area of study is in the field of intercultural communication.

Ruben, Askling and Kealey (1979) and Baird and Stull (1981) have identified theoretical support for a number of "universal" communication skills that will transcend cultural boundaries. Ruben et al. reviewed several sources that suggest that acceptance and openness are among communication practices that result in developing and maintaining positive climates for interaction. However, the support for either acceptance or openness as universal communication techniques is purely theoretical and has prompted this empirical test for support.

Openness and acceptance

Openness in superior-subordinate communication is considered an essential component of an ideal managerial climate (Redding, 1972, 1984; Peters and Waterman, 1982; Bradford and Cohen, 1984). Effective decision-making and problem-solving require accurate information. "Open" employees feel free to express their feelings, ideas, bad news and honest information about their own job performances. "Open" managers permit the expression of feelings, bad news, divergent views, etc. Openness in sending and receiving messages includes both company-related as well as non-company related issues.

Burke and Wilcox (1969), Baird (1973) and Jablin (1977) found that employees are more satisfied with their jobs when communication openness exists between themselves and their superiors. Willits (1967) and Indik, Georgopoulos and Seashore (1961) found

correlations between communication openness and organizational performance.

Several studies have concluded that employees will communicate according to perceived costs and rewards (Blau, 1955; Zaleznik, 1956; Blau and Scott, 1962; Read, 1962; Argyris, 1966; Vogel, 1967; Zima, 1968; and Gemmill, 1970). Employees communicate in ways that will develop positive relationships with those who make decisions about retention and promotion. They may conceal or distort messages that they believe will lead influentials to keep them from reaching their personal or professional goals. Managers and supervisors must develop supportive communication climates in which employees feel free to say what is on their minds.

Collins and Guetzkow (1964), in their review of literature on communication and interaction, proposed that rewards for communication fall into two categories: task-environmental and interpersonal. Task-environmental rewards are aspects of the task that will increase the probability of recurrence of the response they follow; interpersonal rewards are aspects of the behavior of others that will increase the probability of repitition of behavior they follow.

Egan (1970) differentiates between antecedent support and consequent support from leaders for others to engage in open communication. If the leader communicates openly, it is antecedent support, because it is an invitation for others to be open. If the leader rewards others for open communication, it is consequent support, as they will likely continue to be open.

Johnson and Noonan (1972), in their study of counseling communication, found that people will communicate more openly when the counselor responds by accepting what the person has to say without

revealing any evaluative judgments about the message. They also found that when the counselor engaged in reciprocal openness, the client continued to be open. These two types of responses neatly fit the definition of consequent interpersonal rewards for communication openness.

Applying the findings of Johnson and Noonan to communication in industrial climates, Stull (1974, 1978) empirically validated that employees do discriminate among their supervisors' accepting, reciprocally open, and neutral-negative responses to their own open communication.

Purpose of this study

Stull's study was conducted in twelve Wisconsin manufacturing organizations where the population was predominantly United States-born and raised, Caucasian employees.

The purpose of this study is to investigate acceptance and openness as possible universal consequent interpersonal rewards by conducting a similar study with foreign-born employees who work in United States companies.

Hypotheses

Four hypotheses were tested in this study; all four were supported in the earlier study with U.S.-born employees.

1. Foreign-born employees will perceive managerial/supervisory "acceptance" of their own communication openness as a consequent interpersonal reward for task-relevant messages.

2. Foreign-born employees will perceive managerial/supervisory "acceptance" of their own communication openness as a consequent interpersonal reward for non-task relevant messages.

3. Foreign-born employees will perceive managerial/supervisory "reciprocal openness" as a consequent interpersonal reward for their own communication openness in task-relevant messages.

4. Foreign-born employees will perceive managerial/supervisory "reciprocal openness" as a consequent interpersonal reward for their own communication openness in non-task-relevant messages.

Methodology

A 2 x 2 x 3 factorial design was used to test the hypotheses; the variables were United States-born v. foreign-born employees, task-relevant v. nontask-relevant subordinate messages, and accepting v. reciprocally open v. neutral-negative supervisor responses.

Subjects

The subjects were 42 United States-born and 52 foreign-born employees representing 30 different companies in California's Silicon Valley, including manufacturing, banking, health care, educational, professional and public utilities organizations. The foreign countries represented were Taiwan, Mexico, Pakistan, Canada, United Kingdom, Poland, Germany, China, Bangladesh, Iran, Vietnam, Korea, Hong Kong, The Philippines, El Salvador, Saipan, Thailand, Cambodia and India. The subjects were all enrolled in various business training seminars.

Instrument

Each subject was presented with a booklet containing 20 dialogues created by the researcher. A typical dialogue was:

SETTING: An employee has been working at his job, doing what he feels is necessary and appropriate, but without receiving much guidance or feedback from his supervisor. He approaches his supervisor:

SUBORDINATE MESSAGE: "You know, I'm getting frustrated because I don't know what you expect of me on the job."

SUPERVISOR RESPONSE: "Yeah, I often feel frustrated when my boss doesn't give me clear feedback, too."

SUPERVISOR RESPONSE: "I guess you have a right to feel that way. Let's sit down and figure out a way to improve our communication."

SUPERVISOR RESPONSE: "Well, I've always figured that if you had any problems with your job, you'd ask about them."

Subjects were asked to rate each supervisor response on a Likert-type scale from 1 to 5 (1 = would never like to hear; 5 = would always like to hear). Supervisor responses were scrambled to avoid an extraneous sequence effect.

In the above dialogue, the first supervisor response was intended to be "reciprocally open"; the second was "accepting"; the third was "neutral-negative." The subordinate message was "task-relevant." There were ten "task-relevant" and ten "nontask-relevant" subordinate messages.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed with an analysis of variance and a post-hoc Scheffé test.

Results

A multiple-factor ANOVA indicated that the employees in this study discriminated among response types (Table 1). A post hoc Scheffé test identified the significant differences lying between acceptance and neutrality/negativity and reciprocity and neutrality/negativity for task-relevant situations. For non-task relevant openness, the above results applied with further discrimination between acceptance and reciprocity (Table 2).

TABLE 1: Analysis of variance for subordinates' preferences for supervisory responses to communication openness

Response Type	Mean Score[a]	Mean Square	d.f.	F-value
Task-relevant				
Acceptance	37.04	8256.960	2	253.692*
Reciprocity	35.43			
Neutrality/Neg	18.23			
Non-task relevant				
Acceptance	38.90	7215.979	2	246.382*
Reciprocity	35.62			
Neutrality/Neg	21.16			

a These composite means represent ten items from the questionnaire. Scalar means can be found by dividing by ten. For task-relevant acceptance, the scalar mean is 3.70.

* p = .001

TABLE 2: Differences between means for preferences for supervisory responses to communication openness by subordinates: Scheffé

Response type		
Task-relevant	Reciprocity	Neutrality/Negativity
Acceptance	1.61	18.80*
Reciprocity		17.20*
Non-task relevant		
Acceptance	4.28*	18.74*
Reciprocity		14.46*

* p = .05; .05 Scheffe value = 1.83 for task relevant data, and 2.08 for non-task relevant data.

These data support all four hypotheses at the .05 level of statistical significance. They lend support to the idea that

supervisors and managers may learn and apply "universal" communication practices that will optimize the outcomes of various cross-cultural interactions in organizations. T-tests showed that there were no significant differences between U.S.-born and foreign-born employees for task-relevant acceptance, task-relevant reciprocity and non-task relevant acceptance. Foreign-born employees rated non-task relevant reciprocity higher than did U.S.-born employees ($p = .05$). U.S.-born employees rated neutral-negative responses much lower ($p = .001$) than did foreign-born employees (Table 3).

TABLE 3: Differences between means[a] for preferences for supervisory responses to communication openness by subordinates

Response Type	U. S. Born	Foreign Born	F-value
Task-relevant			
Acceptance	37.32	36.46	1.01
Reciprocity	35.02	36.03	1.24
Neutrality/Neg	14.32	23.08	5.16**
Non-task relevant			
Acceptance	38.57	38.83	1.09
Reciprocity	34.12	37.05	1.78*
Neutrality/Neg	17.57	25.30	2.92**

a These composite means represent ten items from the questionnaire. Scalar means can be found by dividing by ten. For task-relevant acceptance, the mean for U.S.-born employees is 3.73.

* $p = .05$
** $p = .001$

Discussion

The findings on acceptance and reciprocity as rewards for communication openness are consistent with the findings of the 1974 study, with the minor exception that no significent differences were found in this study between task-relevant and non-task relevant acceptance. The support is strong that all employees are favorably predisposed toward accepting and open feedback from their supervisors. However, this support should not be accepted without careful analysis.

Reliability coefficients were calculated for each of the six categories. The coefficients were low (<.70) for task-relevant acceptance and task-relevant reciprocity, suggesting that some of the responses were inconsistent with others. The coefficients were > or = .70 for the other four categories. Further analysis showed that subjects rated responses much higher when they showed a commitment to action. For example, "Let's sit down and talk about this" consistently received higher ratings than did responses like, "I can understand your concern," or "I can see that this is getting under your skin." These findings are consistent with comments made during debriefing and similar comments made during the 1974 study that too often accepting or active listening-type responses are seen as "token" responses or as a "pacification" attempt by the supervisor. Egan (1970) encourages "accurate empathy" as opposed to, among other types of empathy described, "cliche or ritualistic" empathy. Ruben (1976) developed a five-point scale for empathic responses, with the

medium-high and high levels (four and five) encouraging further communication between interactants. These response types contain both verbal and nonverbal cues that suggest that the listener is at least understanding of the speaker and has demonstrated genuine interest in the well-being of that individual. Pettit and Vaught (1984) studied the interpersonal capability and self-actualization of managers, breaking their response-types into five separate categories, of which the most sensitive were empathic, genuine and provided direction for employees. Response-types that were rated consistently high in Stull and Baird's research study were those that showed agreement with a particular concept, praise for the employee, and honesty from the supervisor.

Differentiating between "empathetic" responses and "sympathetic" responses, Bennett (1979) demonstrates clearly why acceptance might be regarded as more rewarding than reciprocal openness. Reciprocally open messages typically disclosed how the manager/supervisor felt, feels or would feel in a similar situation (e.g. "I know just how you feel; I was there myself." I would feel that way too.") Accepting responses more often were attempts to see the situation from the point of view of the employee, or were empathic ("This <u>is</u> the fourth time that this machine has broken down this month; you have a right to be upset."). Bennett also suggests that reciprocally open/sympathetic messages might be more credible coming from members of the same ethnic group because of the differences in how circumstances might effect foreign-born employees.

Negative and neutral messages had the highest reliability coefficients; looking back, it was easier to come up with negative and neutral responses. Typically, these responses showed no concern for the employee's well-being, no commitment to any action on the employee's behalf, no trust in the employee, and no interest in improving working conditions; these responses indicated no interest in giving information to or receiving information from employees. The ease with which the researchers came up with the negative responses for this study poses an interesting question: Do managers respond as readily and as easily with negative remarks?

Why did foreign-born employees not rate negative-neutral responses as unfavorably as did United States-born employees? Further studies might investigate whether foreign-born employees are as sensitive about negative or neutral feedback as are United States-born employees. Pascale and Athos (1981) state that Japanese employees "flow with" situations better than do United States-born employees; perhaps they are not as easily affected by negative comments; perhaps Eastern philosophies in general promote coping with difficult situations.

Responses that show a supervisor's acceptance of employees as people and a commitment to action typically lead to trust and supportive climates for further interaction. Responses that merely provide "lip service" leave employees wondering about the inherent ambiguity in those responses; they lead to doubt and, often, mistrust.

These results and suggestions clearly point to a need to study empathy more from an academic and training perspective to

find which types of responses appear sincerely empathetic to the receiver. We may do more harm than good if we are perceived as only trying to keep a situation from getting out-of-hand or if we are keeping employees from expressing what to them is reality. If managers are truly interested in developing meaningful relationships that enhance organizational performance and synergy, they will accept training in and will practice responses so that these responses will become natural to their repertoire of communication skills.

In their recent study, Pettit and Vaught (1984) advise that if modern organizations are to continue to grow toward what most organizational development specialists consider "healthy" organizations, openness, trust and understanding must characterize managerial styles; this will require a continued development of interpersonal capability and self-actualization among managers.

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